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THE CAHOKIA INDIAN MOUNDS: A PLEA FOR THEIR PRESERVATION

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The great works of the ancient inhabitants of the Mississippi valley are destroyed one by one. The bluff face near Alton, Ill., which bore the Piasa pictograph, was quarried away by lime burners in 1857; the "big mound" which stood on the present site of St. Louis was graded down in 1869. And now it seems that the ground occupied by the Cahokia mound group in the American Bottom is to be broken up into factory sites.

On his last visit to Cahokia the writer stood on the highest platform of the great mound and saw the smoking stacks of East St. Louis only half a mile away. The Cahokia group lies between East St. Louis, Ill., on the west and Collinsville on the east, between the Mississippi River and its bluffs, on an alluvial plain at this point eight miles wide. Both cities are enjoying great industrial prosperity and are rapidly growing together. Their junction may in a few years efface one of the greatest earthworks of prehistoric America.

DIMENSIONS OF THE CAHOKIA MOUND

There are in the Cahokia group no fewer than half a hundred mounds, many of them in a remarkably fine state of preservation. They are of different shapes and sizes—square, rectangular, round, and oval. In their present state of erosion they vary in height from four to one hundred feet. Brackenridge, who visited them in 1811, describes them as "resembling enormous haystacks scattered through a meadow."¹ Among the least eroded are the "Twin Mounds", one of which rises to a sugar-loaf peak while the other has a round top with a scalloped border like the large end of a conch shell.

In a central position dominating the group is the great tumulus known locally as the "Monks' Mound." It is rectangular in form. According to the survey by William McAdams (results published in 1883), the base dimensions are 998 feet from north to south by 721 feet from east to west. It covers an area therefore of about 16 acres. Later surveys have assigned respectively 1,080 and 1,010 feet as the length, and 710 feet as the width. The difficulty of determining the line of junction of the lower edge of the mound with the level of the plain is chiefly responsible for the variation. The mound is built in a series of four receding platforms, the highest of

¹ H. M. Brackenridge: *Views of Louisiana, together with a Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River in 1811*, Pittsburgh, 1814, p. 187.

which is 100 feet (97 feet and 104 feet in the later surveys) above the ground level and whose arrangement and relative dimensions can be better understood from the illustration accompanying this article than from a table. The mound is *strictly* oriented with the longer side of the base in a right north-south line. The lowest terrace extends entirely across the southern face, and to the east of the center there is a projecting point which may originally have been a graded approach. The long north-south terrace on the west is badly gullied, and a modern road leading to the top of the mound cuts off one corner. In spite of years of erosion however, all outlines are surprisingly clear.

This type of truncated pyramidal structure was named by Squier and Davis, the pioneers in this field, the "temple mound."² Cahokia then would be most nearly allied with the *teocallis* of Mexico, and it has been conjectured that on the highest platform of the Illinois mound burned the eternal fire to the sun god as on Tolula and Teotihuacan. Furthermore, Cahokia, because of its huge dimensions and the regular beauty of its construction, deserves comparison with the pyramids of Egypt as well as with those of Mexico. There was, however, no stone used in its building; it is merely a great heap of drift clay and sandy loam. Cahokia, El Sol at Teotihuacan, and Khufu at Gizeh are all straight with the points of the compass. Their base areas are respectively sixteen, thirteen, and thirteen acres, with base dimensions 998 by 721 feet, 761 feet square, and 756 feet square. Cahokia is 100 feet high, El Sol 216 feet, and Khufu 481 feet.

The great tumulus has never been explored. Mr. Thomas T. Ramey, who purchased the land fifty years ago and whose heirs still own it, took great pride in his possession of this impressive monument of antiquity, fenced it off from his cultivated fields, and carefully guarded it from the sacrilegious spades of relic hunters. His sons have likewise taken care that it should suffer from neither plow nor mattock. The "big mound" at St. Louis contained a large sepulchral chamber in its interior, but whether Cahokia has such a secret to reveal is yet unknown. That there was an extensive burying ground about it was discovered when Mr. Ramey, in ditching the field to the east, dug down through a deep stratum of human bones.

THE MOUND BUILDERS

There has been much brave speculation concerning Cahokia and the race of men that reared its immense pile. The early antiquarians filled the site with all the barbaric splendor of an Aztec capital. Of these things little is known. Certainly the mound is of hoary antiquity. Its builders were with almost equal certainty Indians and not a distinct race, as was formerly held. The mound-builders, however, must have been semi-sedentary agriculturists, living in the villages and tilling the cornfields

² E. G. Squier and E. H. Davis: *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge*, Vol. 1, New York, 1848, p. 174.

where their descendants were found by the French explorers. The Indians were often questioned by early settlers of the region about the origin of the mounds but seemed to have no information on the subject.

There must have been some extraordinary zeal dictating the erection of the great tumulus; for, if we accept its artificial origin, the greater part of the drift clay of which it is composed must have been carried in baskets from the bluffs, two miles away. Whether or not this was a temple erected in worship of the mighty Mississippi River near by, we cannot surely know. We have, however, the accounts of Garcilaso de la Vega,³ the chronicler of



FIG. 1.—Drawing illustrating the present appearance of the Cahokia Mound. Reproduced by permission from the article "Prehistoric Illinois" by J. F. Snyder, *Journ. Ill. State Hist. Soc.*, Vol. 2, 1909.

De Soto's expedition (1540-1541), of Du Pratz,⁴ Bartram (1773-1777),⁵ and others, in which temple and domiciliary mounds are described as having been in use by the Indians of the southern states. On these stood the council houses and the lodges of the *caciques*, and on these were the altars of the sun god's ever-burning fires.

ORIGIN OF THE MOUND

By some scientists it has been contended that the great mound of Cahokia is in large part a natural formation—a mass of loess, or drift clay, left by the receding glacial currents and shaped by the Indians to the present

³ Garcilaso de la Vega: *La Florida del Inca*, Madrid, 1723.

⁴ Lepage du Pratz: *Histoire de la Louisiane, contenant la découverte de ce vaste pays, sa description géographique, un voyage dans les terres, l'histoire naturelle*, 3 vols., Paris, 1758.

⁵ William Bartram: *Travels Through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws*, Philadelphia, 1791.

form.⁶ It was the huge bulk of the mound, with the consideration of the long toil required for its erection, that first caused this theory to be advanced, for others of the same group have been proved to be artificial by the fact that they rest on a stratum of river drift. The contention cannot be resolved until a thorough exploration of the mound has been made by boring, trenching, and tunneling. Examinations of the soil of which it is composed have as yet shed no light on its origin. According to general authoritative opinion, it is highly improbable that such an outlier of the "bluff formation," or loess, would be left on an alluvial terrace.

At any rate there is no doubt that Cahok'a was modeled with oriented sides by the mound-building Indians and was used by them as the central structure around which a great assemblage of similar though smaller structures were erected. It must be kept in mind, besides, that although Cahokia is treble the size of any other earthwork in the United States, its bigness is no good reason for rejecting the theory of its artificial origin. The magnitude of the works of primitive peoples has ever filled succeeding peoples with amazement.

The first account of the mounds was published by H. M. Brackenridge. He describes with enthusiasm two of the groups across the river from St. Louis, and of Cahokia he writes, "When I reached the foot of the principal mound, I was struck with a degree of astonishment not unlike that which is experienced in contemplating the Egyptian pyramids."⁷

He writes further, "The step, or apron has been used as a kitchen garden by the monks of La Trappe, settled near this, and the top is sowed with wheat."⁸ This passage refers to a colony of Trappists who lived in the immediate vicinity of the great mound from 1810 to 1813, and in whose memory it bears locally the name of "Monks' Mound." The cabins in which they lived, however, were on the mound just east. The name "Cahokia" is applied to the group, and especially to the great tumulus, in memory of the Cahokia tribe of Indians, a member of the Illinois confederation, who may have been its builders and whose name is borne also by the creek flowing north of the group into the Mississippi.

The English geologist, Featherstonhaugh, described the mounds in his book "Excursions Through the Slave States."⁹ In 1883 William McAdams

⁶ N. M. Fenneman (Geology and Mineral Resources of the St. Louis Quadrangle, *U. S. G. S. Bull.* 438, 1911) describes the mounds as mainly remnants of a former valley filling, the smaller ones of gentle slope and oval form being entirely natural. To the larger ones he assigns a composite origin. "To a height of 35 feet above its base the material of Monks' Mound shows assortment and stratification, which is evidently natural. Above that height it affords no structural evidence bearing on the question whether it is of natural or artificial origin; but the form plainly indicates the work of man, and not of geologic processes. It is highly probable that the mound in its natural condition was much lower and broader than at present, and was of rounded, almost drumloidal form, similar to the smaller ones of the group which now surround it." It should however be pointed out that a number of the smaller mounds have been opened revealing a fire-hardened altar or a decayed burial chamber at the center. The evidence of borings made has been variously interpreted, and the borings themselves do not appear to have been sufficiently deep or numerous to warrant a positive conclusion.

⁷ Brackenridge, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁹ G. W. Featherstonhaugh: *Excursions Through the Slave States*, 2 vols., London, 1844; reference in Vol. I, pp. 266-272.

of Alton, Ill., state geologist, published an elaborate account of the group,¹⁰ with surveys, map, and figures. Since then the Cahokia mounds have figured in the transactions of many learned societies, and the archeologists of the world have urged their preservation.

A PLEA FOR PRESERVATION

A bill authorizing the purchase by the state of the most important part of the tract was introduced in the Illinois Legislature on March 12, 1913, but it came to nothing. A long campaign, waged by associations formed in St. Louis and in the towns of Madison County, Ill., the county in which the mounds are situated, was unable to extricate the proposal from the welter of politics. Discouraged by their failure to interest the state in the purchase, after many years of unavailing effort the owners are now treating with an East St. Louis realty firm, who may dispose of the land on which the mounds stand to the large manufacturing concerns which are already drawing close to them.

It is disheartening to think of what may then happen. There were originally four groups of mounds, on both sides of the river. The growth of St. Louis obliterated the very landmarks that had given her the name of the "Mound City." The town of East St. Louis, on the Illinois bank, destroyed a second assemblage. The mounds of the Long Lake group, twelve miles north, have been shoveled down to grade the roadbeds of several railroads passing that point. It is not yet too late to save the Cahokia mounds, but in a few years more it certainly will be. The Peabody Museum of Harvard University saved the Great Serpent, of Adams County, Ohio, when it was threatened with destruction. It is greatly to be hoped that some institution or association will come to the rescue in the present instance, before wanton destruction overtakes one of the great monuments of primitive man in North America.

¹⁰ William McAdams: *Antiquities of Cahokia, or Monks' Mound, in Madison County, Edwardsville, Ill.*, 1883.